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Godparents

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about church (the Latin words that form the acronym INRI on the cross posed some difficulty), and has taken him to Mass at the Abbey of the Genesee.

"Cool," Tristin recalls of Mass with the monks. "It looked different to me. I had a lot of questions."

"Yeah, you usually do," Mathews teased.

Mathews doesn't have detailed plans, but said he's committed to continuing his godparenting "with the religion as its core."

"Roger is a beautiful godfather. Tristin is his pride and joy," said Sister Lucille Nalbone, MPP, director of religious education at St. Andrew.

Most Catholics don't choose their own godparents — their parents usually choose them, and often consider it a way to pay respect to close friends or relatives.

"I think more people see it as an honoring kind of thing: 'We'd really like Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary to be the sponsors; it's their turn and we've used every other aunt and uncle,'" Father Robert J. Kennedy, assistant professor at St. Bernard's Institute, said.

Either way, a godparent — or, more formally, sponsor — according to the Code of Canon Law, is a person "who will help the baptized to lead a Christian life in harmony with baptism." (Canon 872)

Canon 872 also states, "Insofar as possible one to be baptized is to be given a sponsor who is to assist an adult in Christian initiation, or, together with the parents, to present an infant at the baptism ..."

"What happens before baptism as an adult happens after baptism as a child," explained Sister Ann Rehauer, OSF, in an interview from Washington, D.C. She is associate director of the National Council of Catholic Bishops' liturgy secretariat.

She recalled that while serving as chancellor in the Diocese of Green Bay, Wisc., her office received numerous calls from parents who'd become disillusioned with their children's godparents and were asking to change them.

"We were saying to people, 'Instead of thinking about changing, do a better job of preparing and planning. Look for people active in their practice of the faith, who



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer
Amanda Rzadca and her godmother Barbara Young

have a relationship with the family so they can continue as part of the faith development of the child, not just somebody you met at work and moves out of the area.

"Look carefully at who you are choosing," she said, acknowledging that the choices may be limited for some people. However, some parishes will offer parishioners as sponsors.

Barbara Carroll, Rochester diocesan coordinator of sacramental catechesis, said some godparents take their role seriously and some don't.

"And that's the tension. We've always looked at it as an honor to be a godparent and haven't really talked about what all that means," she said.

In fact, the church's first rite of baptism of infants, which wasn't introduced until 1969, actually shifted more responsibility onto the parents than the godparents to raise the child in the faith. Before the new rite, infants were baptized using a briefer version of the adult rite.

"But it is still an extremely important role in the church," Carroll said of godparents.

The practice of sponsorship actually goes back to early church days when an adult pagan being baptized had to be accompanied by a Christian known to the

bishop. That Christian would stand as surety the candidate was properly instructed and suitable. And that practice, in turn, is said to have been derived from requirements for incorporating strangers into the Jewish community. Two men read from the Mosaic law as the candidate underwent a ritual bath, with the understanding he would be bound to the law.

Today church law states a sponsor must be a Catholic who is fully initiated, in good standing in the church and at least 16 years old. If two sponsors are chosen, one must be male and one female. Also, as long as one is Catholic, the other may be a baptized non-Catholic Christian. The non-Catholic sponsor is known as a witness.

Before the canon was revised in 1983, an engaged person could not serve as sponsor to the future spouse. The new code permits this.

"A fiancée or spouse is often the best sponsor," Sister Rehauer said.

In addition, under the older code, priests or women religious chosen to be godparents needed their bishop's or superior's permission.

Today, many a priest and woman religious in the diocese is a godparent. Father David Gramke, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Seneca Falls, will baptize his godson, Alexander True of Ithaca, and ask a proxy to stand in as sponsor.

"So I'll both baptize and be a godparent," he said, surprised and delighted at being asked to be godfather.

Although he'd been a godfather to two members of his own family, he took that on as a youth.

"As a teenager I didn't think much about it at all," he acknowledged.

"I really don't know what it's going to involve," he said of his latest godfather role. "Obviously I'm going to try to make something special out of it."

Father Kennedy has had five godchildren — two nephews, two daughters of friends, and one boy he never knew.

The assistant professor of liturgical studies explained that he acquired the latter godchild when he was a seminarian. A pastor asked him and a woman religious to be godparents for a baby being baptized at Immaculate Conception Church nearly 30 years ago.

"I'm sure it was an emergency situa-

tion," he said. "What his last name was, I don't know. ...I have no idea where he or his family went."

"What I have done is pray for him every day," he said of the boy he remembers as Robert Eugene.

Sister Lucy Walawender, RSM, social ministry coordinator of Elmira's St. Anthony/St. Patrick's Cluster, is godmother to Elaine Rzadca, 11, of St. John of Rochester Church, Perinton.

Every year she makes it a point to take Elaine out for her birthday.

"It's really special when she takes me out at my birthday," Elaine said. "She comes over and gives me stuff. I like to see her."

They talk about school and Elaine's basketball and soccer games. On her 11th birthday last year they went to see the movie "Phenomenon" and then went out for pizza. Elaine treasures a necklace her godmother bought her in Bethlehem, as well as a Valentine balloon, markers, pads, ruler and other art supplies she's given her.

Elaine's mother, Mary Jo Rzadca, explained that Sister Walawender had become a good friend while they were at the same parish. Still, the choice was in some ways difficult for her and her husband Mark.

"It was difficult because a lot of people always pick family members," she said. "It was hard to go out of that realm and pick somebody we knew about a year. We probably did hurt people's feelings, but it turned out to be a good thing. She's an excellent role model."

"You worry about hurting feelings, but that's not what it's all about. You want a role model. We have to look at the purpose of what a godparent is. It is to be a role model, to live a Christian life and be there for the child when they need them."

Her daughter Hilary's godfather Gregory Pierce lives even farther away, in the Chicago area.

"This is long distance, so it's a lot harder," Pierce said. "I try really hard to remember her especially."

He calls and sends cards and books, for example, and will try to attend Hilary's first Communion.

"To me, the point of godparenting is this is a special adult that only you have," Pierce said. "Mine was my grandmother. She had 87 grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but only one godchild and that was me."

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